DOING WHAT YOU NEED TO DO
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JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Psalm 126
Mark 7:24-37
James 1:22–25, 2:14–17

“Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers. . . .
Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.”
James 1:22, 2:17 (nrsv)

God give me work till my life shall end
and life till my work is done.

Epitaph of Winifred Holtby
(1898–1935)

We come to you this morning, O God, at the beginning of a new season
of activity, busyness, crowded calendars, and high energy.
This morning give us a few moments of peace and quiet—
to settle, to reflect, to listen. Silence in us any voice but your own,
and startle us again with your gracious presence and lively love,
in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

“Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers. . . . Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.” Those are very important, critical words in the New Testament. They were written in the first century by a disciple of Jesus, quite possibly his brother James, to a small community of believers, a church. Apparently it was the practice in this little church to give preferential treatment to rich people. When a substantial, wealthy person came to the gathering, the ushers fell all over one another greeting, welcoming, escorting the person to the best seat in the house. When a poor person showed up, he or she was asked to stand in the back. That is the situation that prompted James to hold that little church accountable to its own professed beliefs. You just can’t believe that Jesus Christ is God’s love for all people and treat some folks like that. Your behavior and your beliefs have to be congruent. Your creeds and your practices have to be consistent. “Be doers, not just hearers. . . . Faith without works is dead.”

Very important words. Also controversial words, which set off a theological debate that has been going on for centuries. Martin Luther even suggested that the Epistle of James be dropped from the Bible. This business of "doing the word"—doing "works" to express your faith—is in conflict, Luther thought, with the heart of the gospel, which is that salvation comes through grace, the free gift of God's love in Jesus Christ, not through anything anyone can do. If you think you can earn God's grace by doing anything, Luther taught, you have missed the point.

And yet there is an indisputable truth here, is there not? Faith is authentic to the degree that it affects behavior. Religion is true to the degree that it renews, changes, converts human beings and the choices they make and the lives they live. Of course you can't earn your way into heaven. But the integrity and authenticity of your basic beliefs, whatever they are, depends on your living them out. What good is it to say you believe in a God of mercy and compassion and justice and then walk on by a brother or sister who is cold and hungry, James asked. "So faith, if it has no works, is dead."

On the day I opened the Bible to the Epistle of James to begin thinking about this sermon, I happened to read a poem by Mary Oliver.

> "Be doers of the word, not just hearers," James wrote.

Mary Oliver's poem is "The Journey":

> One day you finally knew
> what you had to do, and began, though the voices around you
> kept shouting their bad advice — though the whole house
> began to tremble
> and you felt the old tug
> at your ankles.
> But you didn't stop.
> You knew what you had to do.
> (*Ten Poems to Change Your Life*, Roger Housden)

Comes a time, Mary Oliver and James agree, to step up, to acknowledge what you need to do, what you are called to do—if I may introduce the idea of calling, vocation—and to get on with it, to do it, to be what you are meant to be and what down deep in your heart you want to be, what you long to be.

The advice you receive will be bad, mostly. Don't rock the boat, don't change, don't do anything different, don't take risks.

When Albert Schweitzer wrote his autobiography, he included a chapter on his decision to walk away from a promising career as a musician and a scholar in order to become a doctor in equatorial Africa. Schweitzer remembers how comfortable and pleasant his life was and how one brilliant summer morning in 1896 he awoke to the idea that he needed, and wanted, to give something back. When he decided to become a missionary doctor, he remembers "battles I had to fight with relatives and friends. They reproached me, tormented me for the folly of my enterprise." His friends concluded, he said, that "[I was] not quite right in my head and treated me with affectionate ridicule" (*Leading Lives that Matter*, Mark Schwehn and Dorothy Bass, p. 29).

It is not always easy to acknowledge what you need to do and to do it. You'll get lots of bad advice, the poet promised. Nevertheless, knowing and doing what you need to do is the most important matter any of us ever encounters. It is the matter of the meaning and purpose of our lives, what we are here to do. It is the matter of our calling, our vocation, which is what "calling" means. It is not merely a matter of how we earn a living, although it may be. In fact the best blessing of all, I think, is to be paid to do what you are called to do and want to do. It is a blessing not enjoyed by all. Sometimes you do what you have to do. Sometimes responsibility for others necessitates doing something you do not wish to do or like to do. I'm not the only one, I am sure, whose gratitude to parents has deepened over the years knowing those parents worked at jobs they didn't like, perhaps even hated—did what they had to do to provide and create a home.

I love a story Will Campbell, a dissident Southern Baptist preacher, tells. Campbell says he has no patience for the idea of vocation as a "spiritual gloss to what we have chosen to do for ourselves." He tells about talking to a high-wire artist in a traveling circus and asking why he did what he did. The man's answer included all the expected romanticized vignettes—the circus life, the laughter and applause of the crowd, the thrill of hurtling through space. But then, Campbell remembers, the man said something unexpected: "You really want to know why I go up there on that damned thing night after night? Man, I would have quit a long time ago. But my sister is up there. And my wife and my father are up there. My sister has more troubles than Job. My wife is a devil-may-care nut and my old man is getting older. If I wasn't up there, some bad night, man . . . smash!"

"But why are they up there?" Campbell asked. The man looked like he didn't want to answer, and as he walked away he said, "Because I drink too much" (*Leading Lives that Matter*, p. 113).

Sometimes we do what we do because we have to do it: to put food on the table, to provide shelter and security for our children, to care for our aging sister or parent, to support and help our friends. And I want to suggest that that can be a calling too—that being responsible, taking care of business, can be a way of being a doer of the word; caring for a sick child, sitting in the hospital, working overtime, finishing the job, doing it right is also a holy calling.

What shall we do? "There are all kinds of voices calling us," Frederick Buechner wrote. "Calling us to different kinds of work, and the problem is to find out which is the voice of God rather than of Society, or the Superego, or Self-Interest." A good rule, Buechner says, is that "the work God calls you to do is the kind of work (a) that you need most to do and (b) that the world most needs to have done. The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet" (*Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC).*

More recently, Buechner has written that the question of what to do leads to a more important question of what you will be. "'What in the world will you be when you grow up?' It is the great question still. 'What are you going to be?'" Buechner just turned eighty and says the question is still wide open for him (*Secrets in the Dark*, p. 138).

Deep inside each one of us, as deep as our need for food and drink, is a need for authenticity, for integrity, for a life lived on the basis of our strongest and most precious beliefs. Deep within each one of us is a need for our lives to have meaning, significance. Deep inside we know that simply working, earning, spending, accumulating, amusing ourselves, is not enough. We are meant for more.

In their book, *Practicing Our Faith,* Dorothy Bass and Craig Dykstra record an interview with a forty-year-old woman. "I never thought I'd be living this way. Somehow I imagined that life would be simple." She thinks she should have it all together, but she doesn't. She's busy, overextended, never has time to do what she wants to do. She volunteers a little but works long hours and is exhausted pretty much all of the time. "This is not how I intended to live my life" (p. 1).

She expresses an experience we all know, at least in part. And she also articulates the yearning to live whole and meaningful and authentic lives.

Among the many, many effects 9/11 has had on our life and our culture is a renewed sense of the preciousness of individual lives, our lives, and the urgent need to value them and honor them by living them intentionally. After 9/11, many, if not most, people witnessing

the heroism and self-sacrifice of police and firefighters and rescue workers resolved somehow to do something to make the world a better place. For a while, people volunteered, went back to church, worked in soup kitchens, joined study groups, extended friendship to others.

We seem to know intuitively, although sometimes it takes something as tragic as 9/11 to reawaken us to it, that we need to live out our deepest values, to be doers of the word, to respond to God's call in our hearts to be better people, to live authentic lives, to make the world a little better for our being here.

Five years after that date, it is also time for a conversation about what our nation should do and be. In a fine cover article on "What We Have Learned Since 9/11," *Time* magazine last week suggested that we are in need of a hard conversation about America's vital interests and abiding values but we are too bitter and suspicious to have it. We need to ask, without the accusation that asking is disloyal, whether abandoning the very rights we treasure, and in the name of spreading those rights, young Americans are dying today, whether abandoning them is what this great and hopeful nation needs to do. We need to talk, without the suggestion that dissent is unpatriotic, about whether this great and hopeful nation wishes to ignore international treaties and conventions and its own constitutional guarantees for the treatment of prisoners. The *New York Times* asked ten distinguished leaders in the field of security and antiterrorism what we need to do to prevent another 9/11. The former foreign minister of Germany and Princeton professor said simply that if we abandon our values in the process of fighting terrorists, they win. He said this world needs to see a great nation holding to its values even under fire. We need a good conversation in the days ahead about what our nation needs to do and be.

And we need an ongoing conversation about the church in all of that. "Be doers of the word, and not hearers only" was addressed to a congregation, after all. It is probably the briefest and best mission statement for the church of Jesus Christ, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago, and every church that claims the name Christian: "Be doers of the word." Our job, our mission, our reason for being here is simply to "do the word," to give corporate, missional expression to what we most deeply believe. And so we measure ourselves, not on the basis of how many members we have or the size of our budget. We evaluate and measure a church on the basis of what it does in the world, the lives it touches, the sick visited, the hungry fed, the fallen lifted up, the grieving

encouraged, the children nurtured and taught and loved, the excluded included.

That's where this all started, after all, with an admonition to a church to stop discriminating and to be as welcoming and inclusive of all people as God's love in Jesus Christ. In the Gospel lesson from the seventh chapter of Mark, Jesus himself showed what that looks like: healing and reconciliation and new life for two outsiders, a woman and a blind man, both Gentiles, both outsiders. His healing love, his willingness to do and to be what he believed and taught prompted people to say about him one of the most winsome, wonderful, compelling descriptions: "He has done everything well."

What will you do? What will you be when you grow up? Questions we ask and answer all our lives. Our faith is that God does call us, that among all the voices telling us what to do with our lives there is one that is true and good and authentic and meant for us, individually, personally.

Some need to pick up and move to a new place.

Some need to walk away and start all over again.

Some need to launch a new adventure full of risk and excitement.

Some need to find a way to start giving love, to volunteer, to work in the church or the child welfare agency, to serve soup and bread, to stand up and be counted when it comes time to do God's work in the world.

Some need to stay put and keep doing what they are doing because it needs to be done, but now, hopefully, with a sense of God's blessing and call.

Each of us is called to live our lives authentically, purposefully, "to do," as he did, "all things well," to be doers of the word and not hearers only.

> One day you finally knew
> what you had to do, and began
> though the voices around you
> kept shouting
> their bad advice.

It is not easy, but the choice, daily, to live authentically, to follow Jesus Christ, to be his man, his woman, whatever else we do, is the

most critical, most important, most hopeful, most saving decision you and I will ever make. I invite you to make it, or remake it, in your heart this morning.

You felt the old tug
at your ankles. . .

But you didn't stop.
You knew what you had to do.

It was already late
enough, and a wild night,
and the road full of fallen
branches and stones.

But little by little . . .
the stars began to burn
through the sheets of clouds
and there was a new voice
which you slowly
recognized as your own
as you strode deeper and deeper
into the world,
determined to do
the only thing you could do—
determined to save
the only life that you could save.

Amen.

Our lives are in your hands, O God, and we trust you with them.
Help us to hear your voice calling us to lives of authenticity
and hope and love and courage and compassion.
Give us strength to carry on when we must and to change when you insist.
O God, we are so very grateful for the precious gift of our lives.
May we value our lives and honor you, who have given them to us,
by living faithfully, following your Son, our Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.